OVERVIEW PRESENTATION GUIDELINES FOR SITE VISITS AND SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF IMPROVING DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS

The overview enables the district/school to showcase its programs and services to the visiting team. The overview also sets the expectations for what team members will see and hear during the site visit.

The seven characteristics of improved schools specifically address the actions that districts and schools might be taking to continuously improve, as well as to answer the four constant conversation questions found in the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP) section of C-Plan. The descriptors for the seven characteristics provide information that the district/school can use to describe the overall picture of its school improvement efforts.

The district/school is encouraged to prepare for the overview by giving consideration to its school improvement journey through the "**what**" and "**how**" of each of the following characteristics:

Vision, Mission, and Goals
Leadership
Collaborative Relationships
Learning Environment
Curriculum and Instruction
Professional Development
Monitoring and Accountability

Districts/schools are also asked to:

- Plan the overview to include significant data and attributes of programs, initiatives, and activities of each characteristic that are unique to the district/school.
- Provide an update on progress the district has made since its last accreditation site visit regarding recommendations and non-compliances.
- Include attention to the district's/school's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program for Four Year Old Children, if applicable.
- Provide a summary of what the district has learned through the Iowa Core process and "next steps" with implementation.

Suggestions:

- Prepare a handout with note taking space to provide to each site visit team member.
- Avoid including detailed information in the school/district overview that can be found in other documents provided to the site visit team.
- The overview presentation should not exceed 45 minutes.

Recommended Agenda:
I. Welcome and Introductions (5 minutes)
II. School/District Overview (45 minutes)
III. Follow-up Questions/Answers (10 minutes)

SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF IMPROVING DISTRICTS / SCHOOLS

Vision, Mission, and Goals

In an improving district/school, the vision, mission, and goals are clearly communicated in the school and community. Stakeholders understand and share a commitment to the district/school expectations, goals, priorities, assessment procedures, and accountability. The vision guides allocations of time and resources. Evidence includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Clearly articulated mission is established collaboratively with stakeholder groups representing the diversity of the community.
- Vision, mission, and goals are communicated throughout the system and community.
- The vision and mission of the district/school guide teaching and learning.
- Every five years, the comprehensive needs assessment process, with input from stakeholders, is used to review and revise the beliefs, mission, and/or vision; major educational needs; and student learning goals.
- Academic and academic-related data are analyzed and used to determine prioritized goals.
- Goals guide assessment of student achievement, district/school effectiveness, and the allocation of time and resources.
- The vision, mission, and goals support values of respecting and valuing diversity.

Leadership

In an improving district/school, leaders communicate a shared sense of purpose and understanding of the district/school's values. Leaders have a visible presence, provide resources and ensure two-way communication between the educational system and stakeholders. Leaders provide encouragement, recognition, and support for improving student learning and staff performance. Leadership is committed, persistent, proactive, and distributed throughout the system. Evidence includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Policies and procedures are established to effectively support district/school operations.
- The school board and district/school administrators implement an evaluation system that provides for the professional growth of all personnel.
- Policies and practices are implemented to reduce and eliminate discrimination and harassment and to reflect, respect, and celebrate diversity.
- The role and responsibility of administrative leaders is supported, respected, and understood.
- A clearly defined system and expectations are established for the collection, analysis, and use of data regarding student achievement and progress with the C-Plan.
- The capacity of staff, students, and parents to contribute and lead is built and supported.
- Opportunities for participation are provided for input, feedback, and ownership for student and system success among staff, students, parents, and community.
- Equity in access to learning opportunities and compliance with local, state, and federal legislation is ensured.
- Leaders at all levels understand and manage the change process.

Collaborative Relationships

In an improving district/school, stakeholders understand and support the mission and goals of the district/school and have meaningful roles in the decision-making process. Collaboration results from a culture of participation, responsibility, and ownership among stakeholders from diverse community groups. Educators in the system develop and nurture a professional culture and collaborative relationships marked by mutual respect and trust inside and outside of the organization. The system works together with balance between district direction and school autonomy. Evidence includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Instructional staff is provided opportunities for interaction to focus on professional issues.
- Instructional staff constructively analyzes and critiques practices and procedures including content, instruction, and assessment.
- Instructional staff follows established procedures to resolve professional conflicts, solve problems, share information about students, and communicate student information to parents.
- Processes and procedures that invite and respect stakeholder input, support, and interaction are implemented by the district/school.
- Parents are involved as partners in the educational process.
- Positive alliances among school staff, students, parents, and diverse community groups are created and nurtured.

Learning Environment

In an improving district/school, the school environment is conducive to teaching and learning. The environment is safe, orderly, purposeful, and free from threat of physical, social, and emotional harm**.** Teachers are familiar with students' cultures and know how to work effectively in a multi-cultural setting. Students are guided to think critically about learning and have opportunities to apply learning to real world situations. Classrooms are integrated with diverse learners (i.e., gender, race, special needs, at-risk, gifted, national origin). Evidence includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Rules and procedures for behavior and consequences are clearly communicated and consistently administered.
- School facilities are physically accessible and school routines enhance student learning.
- Materials, resources, technology, programs, and activities reflecting diversity are available to all students.
- The district/school provides a clean, inviting, welcoming environment.
- A clearly understood crisis management plan is established, communicated, and implemented when necessary.
- Teaching and learning are protected from external disturbances and internal distractions.
- The district/school reflects the contributions and perspectives of diverse groups and preserves the cultural dignity of staff, students, and parents.

Curriculum and Instruction

In an improving school, curriculum challenges each student to excel, reflects a commitment to equity, and demonstrates an appreciation of diversity. There is an emphasis on principles of high quality instruction, clear expectations for what is taught, and high expectations for student achievement. Educators have a common understanding of quality teaching and learning. Instruction is designed to accommodate a wide range of learners within the classroom. Teachers have knowledge and skills need to effectively implement characteristics of effective instruction. The staff accepts responsibility for the students' learning of the essential curriculum (e.g., Iowa Core). Instructional time is allocated to support student learning. Evidence includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Educators implement effective instructional practices for each and every student.
- School and classroom tasks and activities are inherently engaging, relevant, and lead to applying knowledge to authentic tasks.
- Content, instruction, assessments, and policy are aligned.
- A shared vision of effective instruction is held by all instructional staff.
- Curriculum and instruction reflect contributions from diverse racial, ethnic, and personal backgrounds.
- Students are provided opportunity and time to learn.
- Teachers are provided with an instructional framework that employs research-based strategies for use with diverse learner characteristics.
- Instructional decisions utilize a process of collecting, analyzing, and summarizing data.

Professional Development

In an improving district/school, staff is qualified for assignments and engages in ongoing learning opportunities to improve effectiveness. Student achievement and other sources of data are used to set goals for professional development. The district provides professional learning opportunities that include theory, demonstration, practice, and coaching. Evidence includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Professional development focus is determined through the analysis of student achievement and performance data.
- Professional development is focused and based on research-based strategies.
- Professional development sessions build on one another, are distributed throughout the school year, and are sustained over time.
- Time is provided for teachers to collaborate and apply new content and pedagogical knowledge.
- An established system provides support to monitor and evaluate implementation of professional development and its impact on student learning.
- Formative student data and teacher implementation data are used to adjust professional development and guide instructional decisions.
- All school staff members, instructional and non-instructional, are provided professional development to support job roles and functions.
- Professional development activities contribute to the capacity of all school staff to develop cultural competence and to reflect and respect diversity in classroom and work environments.

Monitoring and Accountability

In an improving district/school, the district/school establishes a comprehensive system that monitors and documents performance of student progress, curriculum, instruction, programs, and initiatives. Results from assessments drive the goal setting and decision-making processes. Leadership supports a system that regularly analyzes student performance and program effectiveness. Instructional decision-making utilizes a process of collecting, analyzing, and summarizing data. Evidence includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- A system for district-wide student assessments, including multiple measures that are valid and reliable, is implemented.
- Decision-making for the continuous improvement of instruction and student learning using student achievement and teacher implementation data is employed.
- The district's/school's cycle of program evaluation, as noted in the C-Plan, is implemented.
- Summative evaluation processes are used to determine whether professional development has resulted in improved student learning.

Note: Through a study of research, the Iowa Department of Education's Bureau of Accreditation and Improvement Services identified seven characteristics of improving districts and schools. The characteristics of improving districts and schools are used to organize the comprehensive site visit process, as well as the organizer for the comprehensive site visit report. Sources: **Characteristics of Improved School Districts: Themes From Research**, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Olympia, Washington (2004); **Iowa Core** (2008), developed through the Iowa Department of Education; **What Works in Schools: Translating Research Into Action**, Robert J. Marzano, Association For Supervision And Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Virginia (2003); and **Accreditation Standards For Quality Schools**, AdvancED Worldwide, Tempe Arizona (2006).

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